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Capitol Hill Hypocrisy

By Michael Collins Piper

Congressional uproar over a surprise FBI raid on the Capitol Hill office of Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.) reveals precisely how deceitful and hypocritical members of Congress — of both parties — really are. When the Justice Department was engaged in a campaign over several years to conjure up a fraudulent indictment and conviction of then-Rep. Jim Traficant (D-Ohio), not a single member of Congress came to the defense of the populist maverick.

Yet, a bipartisan bevy of big name politicians are expressing shock and dismay at the FBI having conducted the raid on Jefferson's congressional office. They argued that the action may violate the principle of "separation of powers" between the legislative branch, Congress, and the executive branch of which the FBI, a division of the Justice Department, is a part.

The FBI raid followed a similar raid on Jefferson's home in New Orleans some time ago. The raid on his home was prompted by the fact that the FBI had videotaped Jefferson accepting a $100,000 bribe in marked bills from an associate who was secretly working with the FBI. After the big pile of cash was passed to the congressman, the FBI followed up and raided Jefferson's home where $90,000 of those funds, wrapped in $10,000 increments, was found in a freezer. The raid on Jefferson's Capitol Hill office is part of the ongoing inquiry into Jefferson's alleged criminal influence peddling.

Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert (Ill.) and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) have expressed concern about the raid on Jefferson's congressional office. They've been joined by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) who says that the raid was "the most blatant violation of the Constitutional Separation of Powers in my lifetime."

But while Hastert, Pelosi and Gingrich — supported by a host of legal scholars — are raising the issue of constitutional principles in the Jefferson case, they never raised a peep when Traficant was being put through the wringer by federal authorities.

The sudden concern for the Constitution by members of Congress causes the hearts of some conservatives to flutter with delight. However, the fact that the entire Congress sat back and watched the crucifixion of Traficant, whose constitutional rights were violated repeatedly, says much about the hypocrisy of those who are now decrying what happened to Jefferson.

The evidence shows that the Justice Department suborned perjury by forcing witnesses to provide false testimony against Traficant by either indicting them and offering them deals in return for telling lies under oath or threatening them or members of their family with indictment.

The point man orchestrating the conspiracy to destroy Traficant was Michael Chertoff, chief of the Justice Department's criminal division. A hard-line supporter of Israel whose mother, a citizen of Israel, once worked for Israeli intelligence, Chertoff now serves as secretary of homeland security in the Bush administration.

Chertoff deployed a minimum of 60 Justice Department lawyers and FBI agents (perhaps as many as a hundred) in a long-running bid to "Get Traficant." Chertoff spent a reported $10 million in taxpayer funds conducting the investigation of the outspoken congressman.

Ultimately, Traficant was charged with such nefarious misdeeds as having a congressional staffer help with chores on Traficant's farm in Ohio and with repairs to the rickety houseboat which Traficant lived on in the Washington harbor because he could not afford an elegant apartment due to an IRS garnishment of his wages.

When Traficant went to trial, Judge Lesley Wells repeatedly showed her hostility to him. At one point, she denied Traficant the right to call an expert witness, a financial crimes investigator, who could refute the lie that Traficant had forced a staffer, Allen Sinclair, to pay him a regular $2,500 kickback from Sinclair's salary.

The investigator had discovered that every time Sinclair withdrew $2,500 from his personal account, the same amount showed up going into Sinclair's lawyer's trust account. Prosecutors claimed that money had been given in cash to Traficant.

Earlier, during jury selection, the judge wouldn't allow Traficant to ask potential jurors about their political associations, a relevant matter since AIPAC and other Jewish groups had publicly targeted Traficant as an "enemy." Traficant hoped to determine whether potential jurors were associated with such hostile organizations.

In the end a Jewish juror caused such a commotion during jury deliberations, relentlessly badgering other jurors who were holding out to acquit Traficant, that they finally voted to convict him just to shut the woman up and bring the matter to a close.

Traficant was convicted and sentenced to nine years in prison. He began serving his sentence on July 30, 2002. Although it was said Traficant might be offered early release if he admits to his "crimes" and apologizes for them, Traficant has said he will not admit to crimes he did not commit in order to get his sentence cut short.

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